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BEAT THE DEVIL

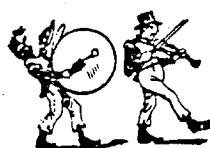
Long National Nightmare

The final, preposterous image of the election campaign coverage was furnished by *Newsweek's* special "Election Extra" issue. It turns out that all through those long months a team of *Newsweek* political reporters had an agreement with their sources that they would be given access to certain material on condition it was not published until after the election. One reporter actually had two notebooks, one (presumably labeled B for bullshit) in which he would dutifully record the assertions of Administration officials that no secret plan to raise taxes was in the works, and the other (T for truth) in which he wrote down things to be concealed—Administration scenarios for raising taxes—until such time as their publication made no difference. *Time's* Strobe Talbott had a similar deal during the Nitze and Rowney arms talks in Geneva last year.

The defense for this sort of arrangement is that without it, the reporter would simply learn nothing—which is pernicious nonsense. By partaking in these embargoes the reporter becomes even more complicit in news management than is regularly the case. The losers are the readers who trustingly fork out their money each week for *Time* and *Newsweek* in the hopes of finding out what's going on, little realizing that bargains have been made to keep them in the dark as long as it counts.

The Phantom Planes

George Shultz should become the second member of Reagan's Cabinet to be on the receiving end of a criminal indictment. On November 10, discussing the leaked election night reports of the possible arrival of MIG-21 fighter planes in Nicaragua, he remarked, "Whoever leaked that material engaged in a criminal act in my opinion." But back at the start of October, in exchanges with people not in government, Shultz was alluding to the fact that a Soviet freighter bound for Nicaragua might be carrying MIG-21s.



In late September, U.S. satellite photographs of the Bakuriani receiving cargo at its Black Sea port showed that on an adjacent quay sat crates of a type that had been known in the past to contain MIG-21s. After an interval of cloud cover, photographs showed that the Bakuriani had departed and the crates were gone. Intelligence analysts inferred that the latter might have been loaded onto the former, and the news was circulated throughout the Administration.

As the Bakuriani plowed its way across the Atlantic, round Cape Horn and up toward Corinto, advocates of escalation against Nicaragua began to see the uses to which ship and cargo could be put.

ALEXANDER COCKBURN

The ultras—to be distinguished marginally from the ordinary warmongering rabble—include Gen. Paul Gorman, head of the U.S. Southern Command based in Panama, William Casey at the C.I.A., Fred Iklé and Nestor Sanchez at the Defense Department and Constantine Menges at the National Security Council. Gorman and the others tried zealously to promote the Bakuriani/MIG threat in the closing weeks of the campaign but couldn't get it off the ground, since Reagan's top advisers were not keen on a cliffhanging crisis disrupting the pre-election Presidential image of sweet reason. Right at the end of October, in an unusual session of the National Security Council, Reagan rejected the idea of emergency action. The October surprise was that there was no surprise. Had Reagan been slipping, it might have been a different story.

On election night the ultras moved, in a pre-emptive coup designed to seize the high ground during the crucial days of policy formation immediately after the victory. News of the imminent arrival of the Bakuriani was leaked to CBS from the Pentagon, and to NBC from the Reagan party in California. Given the origin of the NBC story, it's possible that the ultras inhabit the highest levels of the Administration.

For the next three days the media handled the story exactly as the ultras had hoped—on the front pages. The emphatic denials by the Soviet Union and Nicaragua that MIG-21s had been or would be dispatched to Nicaragua were duly recorded, along with the Administration's emphasis that no "conclusive proof" of the presence of the MIGs aboard the Bakuriani had been obtained. But by then the MIGs had become purely symbolic.

To the extent that the coverage revolved around the issue of what the Reagan Administration would do if the planes had arrived at Corinto, it was irrelevant whether they had arrived or not. The papers remembered to mention that it was unlikely the MIGs were aboard and then went back to their worst-case analysis. This is often true in war scares. The Russians never deployed nuclear matériel in Cuba during the missile crisis of 1962, contrary to popular memory. Leading up to the crisis all that U.S. spy planes ever observed were metal canisters that might or might not have contained missiles (not warheads), just as the Bakuriani might or might not have been carrying MIG-21s.

A *New York Times* editorial for Friday, November 9, realized the fondest dreams of the ultras: "If American surveillance has blundered, Nicaragua has an easy way to prove it. Expose the cargo and expose the accusers. The larger point—even if galling—that Nicaragua's arms are a hemisphere [sic] concern has already been granted."

Both Philip Taubman of *The Times* and Fred Hiatt of *The Washington Post* managed to establish pretty clearly by the weekend what was going on. Taubman cited "certain national security aides" who "wanted to use the issue of the